

*Review:*

*Flow: The psychology of optimal experience by  
Mikhail Csikszentmihalyi*

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August 2008

Being a teenager, I am compelled to write from a teenage perspective, and to promote in my writing, the benefits of adolescence and of course, point out all those lovely mistakes we humans are so fond of making. I love writing, I always have. It comes naturally to me and I find myself wanting to write more when I am enthused or thoroughly interested about something. When I was writing a piece on being Overschooled but Undereducated, I started out, like all good students are taught to start out, with an outline of what to write and include, and organized all the quotes I could possibly use. But as soon as the first sentence was down, I forgot about my carefully composed plan, letting it collect dust as my mind and fingers whirled away with the ideas glistening at the tendrils of my vivacious brain.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi defines this wholehearted engagement in one's activities as '*flow*', in his book *Finding Flow; The Psychology of Engagement with Everyday Life*. Despite his complicated name, Csikszentmihalyi's theory is really quite simple; finding *flow* is the answer to living a life worthwhile. "What does 'to live' mean...?... To live in fullness, without waste of time and potential, expressing one's uniqueness, yet participating intimately in the complexity of the cosmos" (2). And it is finding *flow* that will enable of humans the ability to stop the waste of our precious time, to use our full potential and to live out our unique qualities without shame or intimidation.

So what is this *flow* I write of? Csikszentmihalyi asks his readers to think of 'life' in the simplest terms; what we experience every day, whatever it may include. In this context, *flow* is easily applicable, but even more easily ignored. We go about our lives doing the most mediocre tasks that must be done in order to properly paint the picture of everyday life. Once in a while though, the paints are smeared together to create something completely different; someone new walks into our life, we are given an opportunity, an everyday task suddenly becomes interesting. But as we become used to these new aspects of life, they begin to fade into the canvas, their lines clearly defined yet the colours dulled. However, keeping your mind active and constantly finding new ways to accomplish certain tasks would allow you to keep a *flow* of energy. This *flow* of energy would act as a fifth gear, enabling you to persist in your task without becoming tired or discouraged, because your mind would be constantly involved in a fascinated state.

How many times a day do you begin something you must do and stop again and again because you are tired, or because you can't seem to focus? It is common knowledge that the more energy you exert, the more tired you become. The same goes for mental recreation. So when we are forcing ourselves to do something that requires little thought, we are actually using extra thought just trying to convince ourselves to keep going, as well as trying to stay focused. In this way, we tire ourselves out and are committed to boredom many times a day. Every human, no matter who they are or where they live, will at some point in their lives be subject to some kind of schedule or daily routine. For most, the earliest such a systematic life enters our lives is during the time in which we attend school.

It would be easier for me to count the times in school I was not bored than it would be for me to count when I was. It seemed to me that as long as I did what I was told, things would go smoothly.

And they did. But I was so bored from simply subjecting myself to someone else's will, that it was a great effort to summon up the energy to create something myself when the time came. Projects and assignments were endless, but the rules and guidelines that accompanied them were even more plentiful. Had I simply done exactly what the instructions told me to do I would have passed with a decent mark, as many of my friends did. But being creative in the way others tell me to be has never been something I liked. And that is what I took every project as; a chance at being creative.

I remember clearly a time when I was given an assignment in my writer's craft class. We were supposed to pick a subject of poetry, such as love, nature, or death, and compose a booklet with works from both ourselves and published authors. The booklet had to be in some kind of creative format with an illustration on each page and an interesting cover. The booklet would be marked out of seventy. Twenty marks were given for whether you followed the instructions. Twenty were given for how well your poems were written. Five were given for the appropriateness of everything included. Five marks for the aesthetics of the booklet. Twenty marks for creativity.

I have always been disgruntled at the thought of a teacher marking artistry. Be it a painting, a dance, a photograph, or a piece of music, I'll never know what right it is of someone else to mark the creativity of another. True, my teacher had a lot of experience in what she did to know whether someone had really tried or followed instructions. But like each individual person, each individual work of art is an expression of independence and of personality. The only clear thing about creativity, on which artistry depends, is whether it is there or not. So it was with this in mind that I worked on my booklet.

I knew the writing and research portion of the assignment would be no problem, but I have always had trouble with designing things to be attractive. I am not at all good at drawing. Still, I knew I had to think of something. My theme was enchantment, and I loved working on the poems. In no time at all they were written and ready. I then began working on the actual book, and it was easier than I thought. With pastel coloured paper, ribbons, sparkles, cardboard, and a silver calligraphy pen, I soon had something I was actually proud of. It had taken no time at all it seemed, and never once had I wanted to stop and do something else, because it was so interesting to figure out the ways to do something creatively rather than what was only required.

The day I handed it in I was fully aware at the difference between mine and most of my classmates. Many displayed the staple design of an average student: clear booklet with coloured computer printouts. Without realising it, I had created something extraordinary compared with what I usually would have done, all because I had expanded my normal way of doing things. I had been in a state of *flow* by taking something I had to do, and doing it with everything I had. The rest of the year I continued to over-reach what I would normally grab at, because only then was I able to fully enjoy my work. When left to my own devices, I was no longer bored.

If asked, I would say that boredom is one of the greatest afflictions in today's world. It drives teens to depression, adults to stress, families to collapse. If we were not bored it would mean we were constantly active in one way or another, and it may mean that many of the problems our world faces would disappear because we would have no choice but to work at them until they did. But ask any teenager in school, ask any child doing chores, ask any adult doing a mindless job, and nine times out of ten they'll tell you they are bored. It's everywhere, and it seems we can't escape it. But there is a solution to be discovered and it exists within us all; *flow*.

Life is never boring if you stop looking only at what is in front of you and realise how much bigger and more exciting everything is. We have disillusioned ourselves into believing that certain things are boring no matter what. Take riding on the subway, for instance. You take the same route everyday, walk to the same spot, get off at the same stop, open the same doors. Eventually you aren't thinking about where you are or what you're doing, you're wondering what's for dinner or what you'll do when you get wherever you are going. There's nothing else to do, so why not right? Wrong.

Taking two minutes to look around, you may begin to notice the people you're with. Maybe

you'll see someone you recognise, maybe you'll notice someone's smile, or unhappy expression. Maybe looking at other people will teach you something about yourself. Or maybe you begin to wonder at the technology that races you to work everyday, the history, and the stories. Maybe you'll begin to fathom the events that have taken place on this train, the people that have been in the same car, the same seat. Maybe you'll start to wonder at the hundreds of individual lives of the people around you. And who knows, maybe all that will give you a reason to take up a little philosophy. Maybe it's in the everyday tasks that the secret of your existence lies.

Like everything in life, boredom affects teens greatly. It disables them from finding *flow* – if teens don't find *flow* during adolescence it decreases the chances of them finding it as adults, and therefore creates a generation of workers who are unsatisfied, uninterested and therefore not producing their best work. Most of my unsatisfied and unquestioning classmates reacted to the same poetry assignment I had with disinterest. Instead of seeing the potential to use their abilities, they saw the boredom of another assignment. Going forward in life with this kind of attitude is exactly what allows our planet to sit in discontent. Nothing is changing if no one is looking for a change.

'But so what?' you ask. Why should I personally, care about finding *flow*? Well let me ask you this: do you care about living a full life? To put it in the words of W.H. Auden;

“If we really want to live, we'd better start at once to try;  
If we don't, it doesn't matter, but we'd better start to die.”

Auden speaks of life, not as a biological state of breathing along with a heartbeat, but as an act of doing. It is this kind of living that makes words such as 'worthwhile' and 'significant' mean something. If we are not trying to live through life, we might as well start dying, since it is the inevitable consequence of life. Life and death should not be thought of as opposites, but rather, as two components that could not exist without the other. We are born to die, or we are born to live. The choice, is up to you.